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AUTHOR Farrell, Walter C., Jr.; Johnson, James H.
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ABSTRACT

The education of low-income urban students, particularly Afro-Americans, has been the subject of much debate in recent years. The purpose of this study was to determine the major educational concerns of a group of twenty-five low-income black parents in the Cobbs Creek area of West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. More than 50% of the parents agreed that their primary concerns were: (1) their children's acquisition of basic skills, (2) the employment of effective teachers, (3) their input into school programs, (4) better disciplinary procedures, and (5) the lack of homework assignments. These preliminary results suggest implicitly that low-income inner city black parents do not consider school desegregation as a major factor in their children's public education. (Author)

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EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS OF INNER-CITY BLACK PARENTS: A PILOT STUDY

by

Walter C. Farrell, Jr., Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Chairman
Department of Community Education
College of Education
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201

James H. Johnson
Doctoral Student
Department of Geography
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan 48823

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EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS OF INNER-CITY BLACK PARENTS: A PILOT STUDY

Walter C. Farrell, Jr., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

The education of low-income urban students, particularly Afro-Americans, has been the subject of much debate in recent years. In most instances, the primary focus has been the most appropriate "desegregation/racial balancing" strategy. The contestants in this controversy have usually been the local school boards and the NAACP. Both groups have been largely unyielding in their positions. The local school boards have generally advanced the concept of neighborhood schools as providing the best social and academic opportunities for urban school children, while the NAACP has been adamant in its stance that desegregation must take precedence over any other educational decisions in the interest of black and minority children.

In the past, black Americans were unanimous in their support of the educational policy of the NAACP, but many black leaders are now questioning the overall benefits to black children--socially, educationally and psychologically--of this "desegregation at all costs" philosophy. Corretta King, wife of the slain civil rights leader, has wondered about "the futile shuffling of students from one school to another with scant prospect of a meaningful educational experience in either,"[1] while Ruby Martin, former head of the Office of Civil Rights at the Department of Health Education and Welfare has shocked old civil rights allies by stating that she no longer

considers integration a high priority.[2] Martin has emphasized concentrating efforts on black children where they are, in the slums. Biloine Young and Grace Bress, researchers of the history of desegregation, have encouraged educators to "free their thinking of the racist notion that there is something magical about whiteness--that without it a black, red or brown child cannot learn."[3]

Recently, Vincent Reed, black superintendent of the predominantly black Washington, D.C. schools, has said that integration is desirable for social development but not critical for quality education.[4] Moreover, a September, 1977 poll of black Americans conducted for the National Urban League indicated that 44.6% of those surveyed believed that integration was desirable but that blacks should first have an equal voice in the schools.[5]

Nevertheless, the most articulate opponent of the NAACP's desegregation position is Professor Derrick Bell, former NAACP staff attorney, and currently professor of law at the Harvard Law School. He has observed that "racial separation, the evil specifically condemned in the BROWN decision is only one of the three major manifestations of the fundamental constitutional violation"--the other two being "unequal and inappropriate school resources and policy-making powerlessness."[6] He further argues that the primary objective of black parents has always been "effective education" whether in black or white schools. But the NAACP feels that a compromise on desegregation will result in the loss of black gains (housing, employment, etc.) in other areas of society.[7] However, the views of inner-city black parents have received little prominence in this controversy, although their children are the ones most affected by any desegregation decision.

This pilot study was designed to determine the "major educational concerns" of a group of low-income black parents in the Cobbs Creek area of West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This investigation answered the following general questions:

1. What are your major concerns about your children's public education?
2. How would you address these concerns/problems in the best interests of your children?

A secondary objective of the study was to generate educational problem statements for a more comprehensive assessment of the educational concerns of inner-city black parents in the future.

These two questions were administered to a group of 25 parents in the Parent's Association of Haven House Inc. (a community-based social service institution in West Philadelphia). The data were tabulated by combining similar responses and presenting those that showed at least a 50% agreement among the participants. The responses are presented in the table below.

TABLE 1

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF THE MAJOR EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS

AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS OF INNER-CITY BLACK PARENTS (N=25)

	CONCERNS	Per Cent Agreement	PROPOSED SOLUTIONS
1.	Student acquisition of basic skills (reading, writing and arithmetic).	100%	Have teachers spend more time on instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic.
2.	Employment of teachers (irrespective of race) who are sensitive to the needs of black students.	92%	Have teachers screened by a parent committee in addition to their evaluation by the Philadelphia school administration. Identify teachers who have had previous positive experiences with black students.
3.	Parental input into school programs.	80%	Establish a Parent Advisory Board that will be involved at each school in all school policy decisions.
4.	Stricter and fairer disciplinary measures in the school environment.	72%	Develop a discipline code. Have teachers and/or special aides responsible for maintaining order in the classroom. Treat black and white students the same when they violate the discipline code.
5.	Lack of homework assignments.	64%	Have teachers assign homework on a daily basis.

The findings show that the major concern of all the parents was their children's acquisition of basic skills, closely followed by the desire for the employment of effective teachers (92%). Their dissatisfaction with the current educational process is further supported by the fact that 80% of them wanted greater input into school programs. This concern has been documented elsewhere.[8] Nearly three-fourths of the parents agreed that better disciplinary procedures were needed, while approximately two-thirds felt that more homework assignments would improve the educational skills of their children. In subsequent discussion, these parents, when asked for their opinion of school desegregation, indicated that it was generally not working for black people. Their views are consistent with those expressed by a low-income black parent group in New York City; they asked: "Why do our kids have to be guinea pigs for sociological experimentation?"[9]

These preliminary results suggest implicitly that inner-city black parents do not consider integration and/or desegregation a high priority for their children's achievement in the public schools. But more importantly, the findings demonstrate a need for a more detailed and comprehensive investigation of the concerns of those black parents who shall have to bear the brunt of any educational policies mandated in our urban public education system.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Robert Reinhold, "Busing: Integrationists Now Have Their Doubts," New York Times, 22 June 1975, p. E 16.

[2]Robert Reinhold, "To Some Blacks, the Bus Ride Isn't Worth It," New York Times, 14 July 1974, Sec. 4, p. 10.

[3]Robert Reinhold, "Busing: Integrationists Now Have Their Doubts."

[4]"An Unafraid Educator," Richmond Times Dispatch, 23 October 1977, Editorial Page.

[5]"Poll Shows Blacks See Limits in Integration," New York Times, 27 September 1977, p. 26.

[6]Derrick A. Bell, Jr., "Is Brown Obsolete? Yes!," Integrated Education XIV (May-June, 1976): 32.

[7]Nathaniel R. Jones, "Is Brown Obsolete? No!," Integrated Education XIV (May-June, 1976): 31.

[8]Robert Reinhold, "To Some Blacks, the Bus Ride Isn't Worth It."

[9]Lesley Oelsner, "Goal of Integration in Schools Elusive," New York Times, 20 November 1977, p. 1.